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Get your goat - on a platter

By BYRON BREWER
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Demand for goat meat is on the rise all across the country, especially in metropolitan areas with large ethnic populations. Kentucky in general - and Scott County in particular - has the land, water and forages required to develop and expand this growing industry. And unlike the ostrich craze of a decade ago, the market already exists.

Goat is the most widely eaten meat in the world, and the U.S. imports thousands of pounds of it every year. While I was with the state Department of Agriculture, it was just starting to touch the tip of the iceberg on promoting this new industry as farmers raising beef cattle were looking to this new animal as an alternative.

My old boss, former Ag Commissioner Billy Ray Smith, was a visionary when it came to these sorts of things. He and my friend from KDA ag marketing, Tess Caudill, worked hard to make that first venture a go.

On Sept. 5, 2002, Kentucky held its very first Tel-O-Auction for goats and it was a rousing success. During the auction, buyers bid on goats by phone, and then farmers delivered the goats to the stockyard or collection facility. The buyers had plenty of time to arrange trucking and delivery, and only had to make the trip if they had purchased a group of animals. The first auction, which also included sheep, saw the consigning of 428 kids and 125 lambs to the sale. The goats attracted bids of 78 to 86 cents per pound, with all bids being consistent with then-existing prices for slaughtered kids at sales in San Angelo, Texas, and New Holland, Pa., two of the top U.S. meat goat markets.

The livestock sold was then delivered to the Paris Stockyards.

Tess compiled descriptive information producers provided about the animals consigned to the sale and passed the information on to buyers who bid by phone. She laid the groundwork for the auction by recruiting buyers and meeting with producers all over the state to invite their participation. United Producers Inc. conducted Kentucky's first meat goat Tel-O-Auction and served as a co-sponsor with the Kentucky Goat Producers Association, Kentucky Sheep and Wool Producers, and the KDA.

And that was only the first step.

Lillian Kinsey, a Sadieville producer, worked on improving the genetics of Kentucky's goat herds for 11 years before health called upon her to sell her prized show herd to Allison Fister over the course of three years.

"The popularity of the Boer goat in Kentucky has come about gradually, but all of a sudden the agricultural community - and the public - began to notice," Mrs. Kinsey said. "Going to shows and sales helps the producer see where they need to improve their herd genetics. Whether you are raising goats for the meat market, for sale as breeding stock or to compete in 4-H/FFA events, the key is strong, healthy animals that give you the best return on your investment of time and dollars."

Sadly, the first kid to be born at her farm, Cougar Moon, has died since I last visited the Kinsey farm.

Although the producer has "given up the goat," so to speak, Mrs. Kinsey is having a ball mentoring youth such as Allison in showing. And to demonstrate the power of the purse, Kentucky's top goat exhibitor for 2006 was Sadieville's own Claudia Meeks.

As Mrs. Kinsey said, most breeders have chosen the Boer goat, which originated in South Africa and is known for its high degree of muscling. That has brought it favor as the most popular breed of meat goat, agreed Wade Buntin, a Crittenden County producer and past vice president for the Kentucky Goat Producers Association.

"Unlike other animals being newly raised as livestock, goats have been around forever. They have just never been seen or promoted in the light of a meat product," Mr. Buntin said. "Goats can fit into existing farm enterprises, or they can fill that void left by another operation that has failed. Others are looking at dairy heifers, fruit and vegetable production, improving their beef products. For myself and many other farmers, there is no better answer to the unspoken questions about tobacco than meat goats. The profit potential is there, and so are the resources. And our ethnic markets are on the rise in this state."

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Unlike the ostrich, the meat goat doesn't look like it's going to bury its head in the sand anytime soon.

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